

✓ Rapides Senate district could get carved up in remap session

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ATTN JAN 15 2011
South Louisiana's population losses after Hurricane Katrina will affect political boundaries and how people vote the next 10 years across the state, including Central Louisiana.

The changes will be hashed out from March 20 to April 13, the 25-day span of a special session where legislators will redraw the geographical lines in Louisiana in a process called reapportionment, which is done every 10 years after nationwide population counts.



Dixon

Area legislators and others said the process will be fair, but there's bound to be politicians upset when it's all over. State elections, including the governor's election, are scheduled for the fall.

In the Legislature, some representatives and senators will find themselves pitted against colleagues after lines are redrawn, said Rep. Herbert Dixon, D-Alexandria.

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Remap meetings

The House and Senate governmental affairs committees will conduct meetings starting in mid-February for public input on redistricting, concluding the information-gathering tour with a meeting in Alexandria at 6 p.m. March 1 at City Hall.

Rep. Herbert Dixon, an Alexandria Democrat who is on the House committee, said legislators are relying on the public voicing what they want.

Dixon said he and others traveled to Rhode Island and Arizona recently to attend workshops and seminars on redistricting.

"Public input will be key," he said.

Alexandria is the last stop on a nine-city tour that includes Covington, New Orleans, Houma, Baton Rouge, Lake Charles, Lafayette, Shreveport and Monroe.

Remap

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"We're going to see some coupling, whether we like it or not," he said. "That's a given."

There are many redistricting plans, by many groups, being drawn up. One plan would divide state Senate District 29 among four districts, including a minority district. District 29 now covers almost all of Rapides.

Also, there's a slight chance Alexandria and Pineville could join Lake Charles instead of Monroe for congressional representation in Washington, D.C., state officeholders said.

In all, legislators will redraw representational lines for state circuit appellate courts and the Supreme Court, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Legislature and the Public Service Commission. They'll also redraw congressional districts, which will be expanded geographically and voter-wise as Louisiana goes from seven U.S. House districts to six because of stagnant population growth from 2000 to 2010.

"It's a daunting task," said Rep. Chris Roy Jr., an Alexandria Democrat who represents House District 25. "It's not something I'm looking forward to."

Redistricting proposals that make it to the floors of the state House and Senate will come out of the House and Senate governmental affairs committees.

Central Louisiana could be at a disadvantage because it has only one representative on one committee — Dixon — whose House District 26 is a minority district in Alexandria and Pineville that straddles the Red River. Dixon is one of 19 representatives on the House and Governmental

Affairs Committee. There are no Central Louisiana senators sitting on the 10-member Senate committee.

Dixon said he traded his seat on the Education Committee for a voice in how redistricting is crafted. "We needed to have someone front and center to protect ourselves, if nothing else," he said.

The Census Bureau came out with state population totals late last year, and is scheduled to start releasing population numbers on the micro-level — by blocks — starting in mid-February. The block numbers, which includes demographics, will drive how lines are reapportioned.

There are many groups with a political stake in how lines will be structured, and many are coming up with plans now to pitch to legislators.

"Every group is going to have a version," said Chris Hazel, R-Ball.

Area House members said they don't see their districts changing much, but Senate District 29 could see radical changes.

Senate District 29

Currently, Senate District 29 encompasses almost all of Rapides, and has been represented for most of the last 30 years by Joe McPherson, who cannot run again for the seat due to term-limiting legislation passed in the 1990s that limited legislators to three consecutive terms. McPherson skipped a term in the '90s after he lost an election.

McPherson said there is a plan afoot, authored by the Louisiana Family Forum, which would carve Rapides Parish into four Senate seats. Currently, Sen. Neil Riser, R-Columbia, sits in a district that comes south into Rapides Parish's northeast side, and Sen. Gerald Long, R-Winnfield, represents a district that takes in some of north



Roy



McPherson

Term limits could impact session

The special session of the Legislature to redraw districts, which starts March 20, is the first that will have legislators who this year will be term-limited participating in the process.

That could complicate the unwritten hands-off policy of letting House members redraw House districts and senators redraw Senate districts.

For example, a senator heading into his last year in office because of term limits, set into law by the Legislature in the mid-'90s, could eye a House district he wants to run in, then try to redraw the district's lines to his advantage when it comes to the Senate for passage, said Sen. Joe McPherson, D-Woodworth.

McPherson is term-limited and said he has no "current political ambitions." He said he has no interest in serving in the House.

"I'm a senator, not a representative," McPherson said.

Another variable that could affect fall elections is the return of legislators who have sat on the sidelines for four years because of term limits and want to return to public office, such as Charlie DeWitt, a longtime local legislator who for awhile was speaker of the House.

DeWitt was prohibited from running in 2007 but could run again this fall.

Rapides.

The Family Forum plan, McPherson said, would bring Riser's and Long's districts farther into Rapides, and Republican Sen. John Smith's District 30 would creep into Rapides from Vernon Parish. The plan also envisions a minority Senate district that starts in Alexandria and goes toward Avoyelles Parish, McPherson said.

Dixon and McPherson said the probable loss of minorities in and around New Orleans necessitates at least trying to re-establish minority districts in other parts of Louisiana.

"You have to make an attempt," McPherson said. "You have to try to represent the minority communities to the degree possible."

Roy, a House member who has eyed running for the Senate District 29 seat, said any plan dissecting District 29 "would seriously affect Rapides Parish, to its detriment."

McPherson also opposes the plan. "The one thing I've heard through all my years, the people of Rapides Parish want to be represented by someone from Rapides Parish," he said.

Secretary of State Tom Schedler, a former Republican state senator, offers a different view. He said that after the 2000 Census,

the city of Hammond was split into four Senate districts, one of which was Schedler's.

"They were very adamantly against that, but what they learned was ... they actually were better off because instead of just having one senator, they had four," Schedler said.

Congress

After the 1990 Census, Louisiana went from eight congressional districts to seven, and Clyde Holloway drew the shortstraw. Holloway at the time was the state's congressman for the 8th District, which included Alexandria.

"It was a Democratic Legislature, and I was a Republican," said Holloway, who now represents Central and Southwest Louisiana on the Public Service Commission.

"Mine was the district to chop on, and they chopped on it," he said, adding that the loss of a congressional district this time around was anticipated, unlike after 1990.

The population loss in Orleans and St. Bernard parishes after Katrina in 2005 offset gains in other



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Louisiana congressional districts are shown shaded in different colors.

parts of the state, resulting in a lost congressional seat for Louisiana for the second time in 20 years.

This time around, speculation is that the 3rd Congressional District in Southeastern Louisiana, which runs from Iberia Parish to below New Orleans, will be folded. The effects will reverberate across the state.

Holloway said there is a chance there will be one congressional district stripped across the top of Louisiana, taking in Shreveport and Monroe. That likely would throw

Alexandria into a district with Lake Charles. Currently, Alexandria shares the 5th District with Monroe.

If Alexandria stays with Monroe, the 5th District could flow south to the Feliciana parishes to pick up residents, the effects of a vacuum caused by folding the 3rd District.

"I think Alexandria will either be with Monroe or Lake Charles," Holloway said.

"I think it'll be a fair reapportionment," he said. "Somebody's gotta lose, but I think it'll be fair."



Holloway